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UN COMMISSION REPORTS SEVERE HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN ERITREA

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By Mirjam van Reisen* and Klara Smits | IDN-InDepthNews Report



BRUSSELS (IDN) - The UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea has released a damning report about the situation in the country in the Horn of Africa. "It is not law that rules in Eritrea – but fear," states the report. Some of the violations described in the report may constitute crimes against humanity.

The report was made public on June 8. The "systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations" – for which the Eritrean government is responsible – are extensive and varied. "We seldom see human rights violations of the scope and scale we see in Eritrea today," said Sheila B. Keetharuth from Mauritius, one of the three members of the Commission, in a press conference on June 8.

The UN commission is chaired by Mike Smith of Australia, with Victor Dankwa of Ghana, and Keetharuth, who also serves as the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, as commissioners.

The national service in Eritrea, which is of indefinite nature from the age of 17 on, is said to have widespread "slavery-like practices". Not only is the pay very low, practices like rape, detention and torture are widespread. Combined with the absence of basic human needs such as water, food and adequate shelter, death, disabilities and psychological damage occur often.

Critics are seen as traitors and are severely punished, detained or they just disappear. Even outside Eritrea, the report states, the Eritrean government keeps targeting its diaspora, a practice that is known to take place on a large scale in the European countries. Constant surveillance keeps all Eritrean citizens constantly suspicious and on edge, the report states. Also, the government executes illegitimate forced evictions and seizure of property.

The Commission in nearly 500 pages describes the detailed findings. Besides an extensive review of the history, the legal framework and the context of the current human rights violations, the report goes into great length to describe the ways in which human rights of Eritreans are violated.

Although the Commission was denied access to Eritrea, the findings were obtained through 550 interviews with witnesses and 160 written submissions. One of the major obstacles in obtaining data was the fear of the witnesses for retaliation, even with the promise of confidentiality.

The report of the UN Commission comes as the topic of migration is high on the agenda in the European Union. Many of the boat refugees that risk crossing the Mediterranean Sea in unsafe boats are Eritreans. Even before they step onto the boats, Eritrean refugees face a dangerous journey.

This is illustrated by the recent news that militants from the Islamic State in Libya kidnapped 86 Eritrean refugees. The abducted individuals are separated according to their faith, and fiercely interrogated about the Islam if they claim to be Muslims.

The details of these kidnappings are becoming clearer as several men were able to escape. Even in the face of these kinds of danger, the report says, the Eritreans are desperate to flee what they feel to be a hopeless situation. Therefore, the Commission urges the international community to offer protection for Eritrean refugees and to not send them back.

The report also offers vital evidence against the proposal of aid to Eritrea made by the European Commission. The aid, according to the Commission, would help to decrease migration due to the poor economic situation in Eritrea. This proposal would see the amount of aid to Eritrea triple, in exchange for unclear promises of the Eritrean President to limit the forced conscription to 18 months.

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However, this proposal overlooks the overarching political reason for the increased flows of migration. Eritrean civic groups and individuals, scholars and the UN Commission, have already fiercely protested the proposal.

The report by the UN Commission shows that not only is there no apparent improvement in the human rights situation in Eritrea, but also that previous promises of improvement by the Eritrean regime were never upheld. "To ascribe their decision to leave solely to economic reasons is to ignore the dire situation of human rights in Eritrea and the very real suffering of its people."

(The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Eritrea described the report a "cynical political travesty that undermines human rights". In a press statement on June 9, the Ministry said: "The people and government of Eritrea find the wild accusations . . . totally unfounded and devoid of all merit . . . They are an attack, not so much on the government, but on a civilized people and society who cherish human values." - Editor)

The Commission is scheduled to formally present its report to the UN Human Rights Council on June 23 in Geneva. The full report and documentation are available on <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/ColEritrea/Pages/ReportColEritrea.aspx>

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